Chapter 7: Permanent revolution aborted

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Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam and Cuba have all been cited by the USFI as living examples of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Here we have a series of revolutions in backward, overwhelmingly rural countries, all resulting in the establishment of workers states. For the USFI, at various times, Tito, Mao, Ho and Castro all became (and Castro still is) agents of the permanent revolution. To be sure they were all to a greater or lesser extent unconscious of this noble role, but the strength of the objective process, of the unfolding world revolution, compensated for this subjective deficiency. Hansen gives one of the clearest expositions of this version of permanent revolution:

?The question of the absence of direct proletarian leadership in the 1958-9 Cuba Revolution offers a complication, it is true, but on the main question ? the tendency of a bourgeois democratic revolution in a backward country to go beyond its bourgeois-democratic limits ? Cuba offers once again the most striking confirmation of Trotsky?s famous theory. That the Cuban revolutionaries were unaware they were confirming something seemingly so abstract and remote makes it all the more impressive.?1

This interpretation is one-sided and therefore false. It is true that the objective factors of underdeveloped countries in the imperialist epoch create the essential objective conditions for the permanence of a revolution. It is not true that these objective factors, propelled in a revolutionary direction by their intrinsic features, can achieve a revolutionary communist outcome. Indeed one is forced to ask why the majority of anti-imperialist revolutions have not led to the establishment of workers? states if the objective process is so all-powerful. The truth is that in all imperialised countries that have become workers? states, the subjective factor, i.e. the working class? political leadership, has been decisive. In Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam and Kampuchea Stalinism both in terms of the leadership of these struggles and the intervention of the pre-existing degenerate workers? states, has played a decisive role in establishing the new workers? states. Without Stalinism at the helm of government in such countries, the creation of a degenerate workers? state would be impossible. In Cuba the non-Stalinist origin of the Castroites was overcome in the course of 1961 by the rallying to Stalinism of Castro and the assimilation and transformation of his own petit-bourgeois nationalist movement into a Stalinist party. In all of those countries where the Stalinists did not control the government ? Algeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Iran etc., ? far from growing over into socialism, objective factors have pushed the rulers of such countries back into the arms of imperialism to one degree or another. Without the conjuncture of world and local Stalinism the option of the conscious creation of a degenerate workers? state does not exist. This was the stubborn fact that pushed Castro in a Stalinist direction.

However, while the creation of degenerate workers? states in imperialised countries confirms the tenets of Trotsky?s theory of permanent revolution, it simultaneously aborts the programmatic fulfilment of this theory. The goal of permanent revolution is not the creation of degenerate workers? states that block the road to socialism, but the creation of healthy workers? states as links in the chain of world revolution paving the way to international socialism. Thus Castro and Co. are not unconscious agents of permanent revolution ? they are its conscious enemies. The strength of the objective process can do little to alter this because the fulfilment of permanent revolution rests in the final analysis on the subjective factor, on consciousness, on the revolutionary party and a self-organised, self conscious working class. This much is clear from all of Trotsky?s key writings on the permanent revolution.

Trotsky?s theory

Trotsky?s theory of permanent revolution is not an abstract historical schema, not an objective process of History, it is a
coherent strategy for the seizure of power by the proletariat based on a scientific appraisal of the laws of motion and contradictions of capitalism.

It is rooted in the theory of uneven and combined development. Out of the unevenness of the growth of capitalism in the world and the consequent existence of advanced and backward countries arises the phenomenon of combined development. The backward country does not simply follow the stages of development pioneered by the advanced, but is compelled to ?leap over? stages of gradual evolutionary change. It does not thereby abolish its backwardness but combines it in a new formation. Tsarist Russia combined bureaucratic absolutism and semi-feudal agrarian relations with a small but modern proletariat. Concentrated in huge modern factories in certain strictly delineated areas, the Russian workers pioneered at the level of organisation and tactics all the key aspects of the modern class struggle.

They created the soviet; they developed the political mass strike. They gave their support to the most advanced Marxist party of the Second International ? the Bolsheviks. Bolshevism learned all the lessons of the ?advanced? West, of German Marxism and applied it critically and creatively to Russia ? and hence developed Marxism on the question of the relationship between the bourgeois revolution and democratic tasks and the proletarian revolution and socialist measures.

Lenin disagreed with Trotsky?s theory before 1917, holding that the proletariat would have to share its dictatorship with the peasantry and consequently limit its programme initially to the most far reaching revolutionary democratic but not socialist measures. However life settled the dispute in Trotsky?s favour. Lenin?s April Theses and indeed all his major programmatic and tactical writings, (The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It, Can the Bolsheviks retain State Power, etc.) express the clear recognition that the task facing the proletariat and its party was to seize state power. Whilst it had to limit itself in its agrarian programme to the ?capitalist? programme of division of the large estates to the peasants, it was equally necessary to use the proletarian dictatorship to take measures transitional to socialism. Trotsky had warned in 1907 that:

?While the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism have already become fully apparent, those of Bolshevism are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory.? 2

Trotsky?s words proved prophetic ? not with regard to Lenin but certainly with regard to his ?Old Bolshevik? disciples Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, at various points in 1917 and after 1923. Since Lenin fully accepted tactically the seizure of full power by the proletariat, an alliance with the peasantry socialist measures and reliance on and support for the international spread of the revolution no further disputes existed between him and Trotsky on this question. Indeed it seemed entirely a question of party history until the troika - Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev ? started a campaign against ?Trotskyism? based on unearthing all the disagreements between Lenin and Trotsky between 1903 and 1917. This unprincipled factional onslaught, whose real social and political purpose was the defence of bureaucratism, of necessity focused on the theory which most clearly expressed the socialist and international goals of the Russian Revolution. The most consistent expression of this attack was Stalin and Bukharin?s theory of ?socialism in one country?. No resurrection of Lenin?s ?democratic dictatorship? slogan was possible ? though Zinoviev tried to do so first against Trotsky?s theory then against Stalin?s. In fact, these two completely counter posed theories had developed and transcended Lenin?s theory. Trotsky?s theory of permanent revolution expressed everything positive and revolutionary in Lenin?s theory, Stalin?s everything potentially retrograde. Indeed, it so developed the retrograde elements that it represented a complete Menshevik negation of Lenin?s theory.

The conflict within the International, the social dynamics and goals of the Chinese Revolution, obliged Trotsky to reassess the importance of his own theory. Prior to this he had regarded it as a historical question specific to Russia. His bloc with Zinoviev in 1926-7 both obliged and persuaded Trotsky to keep open or algebraic the question of proletarian supremacy or of the duality of power between workers and peasants in a revolutionary government in China. The Chinese revolution and counter-revolution convinced Trotsky of the general validity of the theory of permanent revolution in the imperialist epoch. Stalin and Bukharin?s stages theory led to murderous defeat for the Chinese proletariat at the hands of Chiang Kai Shek. In his work Permanent Revolution (1928) he summed up his theory thus:
It is a question of the character, the inner connections and methods of the international revolution in general.

With regard to colonial and semi-colonial countries, backward in terms of capitalist development, it meant that:

the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.

The vital importance of the peasantry arises not only from the agrarian but also from the national questions and necessitates an:

irreconcilable struggle against the influence of the national liberal bourgeoisie.

The peasant-worker alliance can only be led by the proletariat organised in the communist party and only the dictatorship of the proletariat can solve all the tasks of the democratic revolution. The peasantry has a great revolutionary role to play but not an independent one?the peasant follows either the worker or the bourgeois.

There is no intermediate stage between bourgeois regimes like those of Kerensky or the Kuomintang and the proletarian dictatorship. The former are counter-revolutionary bourgeois regimes disguised in democratic or anti-imperialist colours.

In a backward country the proletarian revolution will triumph because of the need to resolve the national-revolutionary and democratic tasks but their fulfilment will be accompanied by an assault on private property:

The democratic revolution grows over directly into the socialist revolution and thereby becomes a permanent revolution.

Conquest of power does not complete the revolution but opens it?heralding a series of civil wars and revolutionary wars. The socialist revolution cannot be completed within national limits it:

begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena and is completed on the world arena.

This is what Trotsky calls the newer and broader meaning of permanent revolution?i.e. its character as a world revolution. Whilst backward countries may arrive at the dictatorship of the proletariat sooner than advanced ones?they will come later than the latter to socialism.

To say that this whole process is grounded in the law of uneven and combined development is not to say that this law operates and wins through independently of the actions of the leaderships of the various classes. A conscious revolutionary programme is needed to utilise the consequences and potential of the objective laws. Against those, such as the USFI, who would disagree with this and claim that the ?laws of history? can successfully overcome subjective difficulties, we would repeat Trotsky?s criticism of the Chinese CP in 1928 who under the leadership of the Stalinist agent Lominadze, endeavoured to offload the responsibility of leadership onto History:

Now, Lominadze has made of the possibility of a permanent revolution (on the condition that the communist policy be correct) a scholastic formula guaranteeing at one blow and for all time a revolutionary situation?for many years?. The permanent character of the revolution thus becomes a law placing itself above history, independent of the policy of the leadership and of the material development of revolutionary events.

Hansen and the USFI seek to get round this problem by suggesting that the most conscious act in history?the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a bridge to the construction of communism?can be carried out by unconscious revolutionary communists. In saying this they in fact grant to Stalinism?the force that these unconscious agents invariably belong to or end up with?the capacity to carry out the programme of permanent revolution. This is a betrayal of revolutionary communism of the first magnitude.

As a political tendency Stalinism is absolutely opposed to the programme of permanent revolution. Instead, it
deliberately subordinates the working class as a political force to the parties of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie, and in so doing espouses the petit-bourgeois utopia of a national-democratic stage in the anti-imperialist struggle. Stalinism thus seeks to divert the proletariat's objective propulsion towards the leadership of the revolution and does so either through enforcing political alliances with reactionary classes, or physical liquidation of revolutionary leadership within the working class, or a combination of both.

This programme for the anti-imperialist struggle is bloodily self-defeating. The bitter fruit of the subordination of the interests of the workers and peasants to ?progressive? bourgeois politicians, petty bourgeois nationalist demagogues or military bonapartes has been seen in China (1925-7), Spain (1936), in Egypt and Iraq (1950s and 1960s), in Indonesia (1965), in Chile (1973) and in Iran in the 1980s.

But even should the Stalinists, exceptionally, outdistance their bourgeois ?allies? and seize political power, as they did in Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam and Cuba, then their political expropriation of the working class creates a counter-revolutionary obstacle blocking the road of permanent revolution.

Both of these courses of action form part of the ever pragmatic and eclectic programme of Stalinism, and both of them are diametrically opposed to the programme of permanent revolution. They utilise and abuse the objective basis of permanent revolution to abort its fulfilment and defend their own bureaucratic interests.

The revolutionary variant of the opportunities presented by the law of uneven and combined development within imperialism retains all its validity and urgency. The experience of the creation and history of the degenerate workers? states have proven that the cost of aborted permanent revolution is not only a blocked path to socialism, but a savage defeat for the democratic tasks of the revolution.

The vandalism inherent in the forced collectivisation of the peasantry, the abolition of all freedom for progressive movements, the cultivation of national and ethnic oppression and the strengthening of the reactionary elements in the old bourgeois culture (e.g. family life and religion) testify to this fact.

Footnotes

2. L.Trotsky, 1905, (Harmondsworth 1973) p.332
4. Ibid. p.152
5. ibid. p.153
6. ibid. p.153
7. ibid. p.154
8. ibid. p.155
9. ibid. p.155

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